

Eric's Adoration of the Cleric by GreenLily474

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Summary: The Prequel and backstory to "How do We Fix This?"
When Will and Eleven start at their new school, Will catches the eye of a classmate. He learns to trust someone again and struggles in his friendship with Mike.

Eric's Adoration of the Cleric

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Eric Lauder seemed like a perfectly normal boy for most of his childhood. He lived in a wealthy part of Columbus, Ohio and had affluent parents. His parents were fanatically religious as his father was a Baptist pastor. They viewed their son as a custom order child in many ways.

His best friend was Devin Porter and they'd been best friends since Kindergarten, just as Will Byers and Mike Wheeler in Hawkins, Indiana had been. When they were in 8th grade, they decided to start a band with their friends. Eric played the keyboard and Devin was the lead singer as he had a great singing voice, even when his voice changed. Devin played bass, but struggled to play and sing at the same time.

A few weeks into Freshman year, their classmate Emma's cousins moved to town from Hawkins' Indiana. Will Byers and his adopted sister Jane (or El as she was known by the people closest to her) became classmates of Eric and Devin.

Hawkins had been on the national news due to recent events so people were curious about the new students in school. None of them (Will, El, and their older brother Jonathan who was a senior) were particularly fond of people gaping at them. They all tried to keep a low profile and tended to stare at the floor as they walked in the hallways.

Will was in the honors classes with Devin. While Eric had always been a decent student and got mostly Bs, he had never aimed to excel academically. That would change when he got to know Will Byers.

Devin noticed that Will would reluctantly raise his hand in classes to answer questions only when no one else volunteered as he had an aversion to attention. Will had a different lunch period than his brother and sister, so he was slip off to the library after grabbing his lunch.

Devin, who was ever the thoughtful and caring person noticed this after a week and decided that Will needed a few friends.

"Hey, Will," said Devin as Will was leaving the cafeteria for the library. "Come sit with me and my friends."

"I-uh, I don't-" Will awkwardly stammered.

"C'mon," said Devin as he tugged Will's arm. "You seem like a smart guy in class and I want to get to know you better. I'm not taking no for an answer."

Will sighed and walked with Devin. He stared at the floor as people looked up as he passed. "People are just curious about you because Hawkins has been in the news a lot in the last year. They'll stare less if you walk with a group, trust me."

"Thanks," said Will with a small smile.

Will felt self conscious about his clothes as he joined Devin and his friends Eric, Ian, and Cliff at their table. He then thought that they kind of dressed like Jonathan and Jonathan certainly never looked down on Will. Hopefully these guys would be the same.

Something about Will endeared him to Eric immediately. He was incredibly awkward. Eric somehow thought it was cute. Was he really thinking something about another guy was cute? He was absolutely thinking that. Sure Will tended to wear polo shirts and tuck them in and he combed his hair a little too neatly and parted it down the middle, but he was endearing to Eric.

"It seems like a lot of weird shit has been happening in Hawkins," said Ian. "I mean, the high school girl, the Radio Shack manager, the police chief and all the people at the Star Court Mall! Seems like a death trap." Cliff gave Ian a kick under the table.

Ian grunted then seemed to realize he wasn't being tactful. "Sorry, Will."

"That's okay," said Will as he nervously pushed the food around his tray. "My mom was dating the Radio Shack manager when he died... and she was friends with the police chief since high school. All the

memories were too much for her and she decided to move."

Normally Will wouldn't have shared so much information with people he barely knew. Eric would later learn that he was doing it to keep everyone from asking more questions about why his family had moved to Columbus.

"Let's talk about something else," said Eric. "What kind of music do you like, Will."

Eric thought he saw something like gratitude flash in Will's eyes. "My brother has been making mix tapes for me since I was little. You know, stuff like Bowie, the Clash, U2, REM, Styx, stuff like that."

"Well you just earned some cool points with us," said Devin. Will chuckled a little.

"I never thought I'd hear anyone tell me I'd gotten cool points."

"Oh, why not?" asked Eric. Will raised his eyebrows and gestured at himself. Eric shrugged. "Eh, too many people are putting themselves into the boxes designed by the fascists systems that are jr high and high school."

"So you have good taste in music," said Devin. "Do you play at all?" Will shook his head. "You should join our band."

"But I don't play," said Will.

"From what I can tell, you're a smart guy who can learn," said Devin. "We need a lead guitarist and I have an old Gibson collecting dust."

"Besides," said Cliff. "We're all still learning to play anyway and we still suck, so you'll fit right in. Heck, you might even be better."

"We're practicing tomorrow at my place. Whaddya say, Will? You in?" asked Devin.

"You guys are actually serious, aren't you?" said Will. Eric felt a protectiveness for Will come over him. Perhaps the people in Hawkins weren't exactly kind to him.

"Yes, we're serious," said Devin.

Devin gave Will the old Gibson and Will studied hard and learned to play. At the first practice, the guys discovered that he was a talented artist and tasked him with designing their album covers and posters. It felt good to have people he could walk with in the hallways, especially since he only had geography with El.

In early November 1985, Eric got an idea. "We're going shopping after school tomorrow, Will. I'm borrowing my mom's credit card."

"Shopping?" asked Will.

"Yeah, I'm getting you some clothes for our shows- We could get a gig at anytime."

"A gig?" asked Will. "But we still suck."

"We may suck," said Devin. "But we aren't afraid to challenge ourselves."

"And Eric lives to pick out other people's clothes," said Ian.

"Well, I happen to be really good at it," said Eric. "We look awesome."

The next day at school, Will was dressed in his usual flannel shirt. "You know," Eric muttered in study hall. "With a few minor alterations, that would be great to wear to a gig."

"Really?" asked Will.

"Yeah, let me get the hall pass from Mrs. Tate and I'll show you."

When they got to the bathroom, Eric checked the stalls to make sure they were empty. "Okay, hold out your arms." Will complied. "Sorry if this seems a little weird, but-" Eric grabbed fist fulls of the fabric of Will's shirt and untucked it. He then unbuttoned the top couple buttons and ruffled the collar a bit. Will felt a slow blush climb up his face.

Eric turned Will to see his reflection in the mirror. His hands rested on Will's shoulders as he admired his work. "See, rock star. The ladies

will be throwing their bras at you!"

"Gross," said Will as he thought of the way the middle aged women in Hawkins reacted to Billy Hargrove. While he respected Billy's self sacrifice in the end and sympathized with his plight of being possessed by the Mind Flayer, Billy wasn't exactly the kind of person Will looked to as a role model.

They took a cab to the mall after school. Eric selected various tee shirts and jeans and advised Will to wear them a lot so the fabric would get the faded look naturally.

"I've got an idea for what we can do with your hair," said Eric. "Don't get me wrong, the Beatles were a great band, but there's a reason they changed their look after the first couple years."

"I-I don't like the smell of hairspray or mousse," said Will.

"Not a problem," said Eric. "Let's go back to your place."

An hour later, Will was leaning against the sink as Eric rinsed and combed his hair. Eric picked up the scissors. "Trust me?"

"I guess," said Will.

"Don't worry, I cut my own hair all the time."

"You do?"

"Yeah, well, I let my mom do it for way too long."

Eric made a few snips with the scissors and began combing and drying Will's hair. As he leaned over Will, Eric had a sudden strong urge to kiss him. At that moment, El and Emma walked in. Eric excused himself to go to the bathroom.

He sat with his face in his hands taking deep breaths. He had suspected that he might be gay for a while, but had never actually been attracted too or had feelings for another guy. He knew his parents and many other people had a strong hatred of boys like him. Maybe he should stay away from Will, but he couldn't. He knew that Will needed a friend and he would focus on that.

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Will practiced really hard and became pretty good at playing the guitar. He found happiness with his new friends in Columbus even though he still missed his friends in Hawkins. He particularly missed how close he had been with Mike.

Things were different, though. Mike was going through a difficult time because Will and El weren't in Hawkins. That made him feel insignificant as they had both depended on him for so long and suddenly became more independent in 1985.

Mike imagined that he wasn't just a visit as he laughed with Will and El in El's room on Thanksgiving afternoon. Jonathan and Nancy had gone out with some of Jonathan's new friends. Mrs. Byers was down stairs. They were all living in a guest house on property belonging to Will's aunt Pam (Mrs. Byer's sister, who had gotten her a job working at non-profit near Columbus, Ohio.).

Mike imagined that they'd all simply moved to a bigger home in Hawkins not four hours away from Hawkins. He has missed them both terribly in the past seven weeks. Mike glanced at El, and decided he wanted to be alone with her for a little while. He looked at Will and gave a slight head jerk. Will nodded. Mike thought he saw something flash across Will's face, but then figured he must have imagined it as Will smiled, nodded and left the room.

Mike figured he would talk to Will later when Will's cousin Emma got back and could hang out with El. He remembered going through the donation boxes left behind by the Byers family and seeing a lot of Will's once treasured possessions like old Star Wars toys and X-Men comics (which Mike had ended up keeping) and seeing Will drop his D&D stuff in there (which now belonged to Erica Sinclair). His new bedroom was covered with posters of various musicians rather than Star Wars and D&D stuff.

"So, how is everything going, El?" asked Mike after the door closed behind Will. "Is school alright? Are the other students being nice to you and Will?"

El laughed a little. "Haven't you read our letters? We're fine."

"Of course I've read your letters-I've even re-read them several times. It's just different talking in person."

"Will said that he likes walking down the halls without people staring at him," said El. "I like it too. I miss Max, though. I wish I'd started hanging out with her sooner. And Will, but at least I get to hang out with him now. He and Jonathan are good brothers."

Mike felt a pang of guilt. He felt it was his fault that El didn't get to spend more time with the others while she was still in Hawkins. Perhaps things would have been different. Maybe Will wouldn't have felt left out. Maybe Hopper wouldn't have given him the Ultimatum that led to Mike lying to El and her dumping his ass.

"Mrs. Byers, Will and Jonathan have obviously made you part of the family, how about Will's aunt, uncle and cousins?"

"They're really nice," said El. "Aunt Pam said I look like Mom. Emma is in the same grade and Will and me and she helped us meet people at school."

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Will glanced at his watch as he finished his trig homework. It had been just a little over two hours. Will had managed to finish his assignments and could relax for the rest of the holiday weekend. Mike, Dustin and Lucas used to tease him about his obsessive need to finish his homework early and study extra hard for possible pop quizzes, but Will knew he needed to get tops grades if he was going to get a scholarship to go to college. His mother knocked on the door.

"Devin's on the phone," said Joyce as Will opened the door.

"Okay, I'll get it," said Will.

"I'm going to be up at the main house working on some last minute stuff for the fundraiser this weekend. Call if you need anything, alright Baby?"

"Sure thing, Mom," said Will as he picked up the phone.

"What's up, Devin?" asked Will.

"We got a gig. It's just at a bowling alley, but we got a gig. You in?" asked Devin.

"I-I don't know if I'm ready," said Will.

"You've got natural talent," said Devin. "And this is good practice for you before we play for bigger audiences. Bring El too. And your friend Mike. I'm curious to meet him."

Will took a deep breath. He wanted Mike to meet his new friends and share in his world a little. "Sure, why not?"

"Great, I'll pick you up in 30 minutes."

Will hung up the phone and glanced at the guitar Devin had given him before walking to El's room and knocking on the door.

"Come in," said El. Will opened the door, but didn't step inside the room.

"Hey, would you two like to-"

"Can you give us a little while?" asked Mike. Will glanced at El and noticed the redness in her eyes. That meant she was talking about Hopper.

"El, are you okay?" asked Will.

"Will, please," said Mike pointedly. "Just a little while longer."

"Sure, no problem," said Will evenly.

"Will, wait," said El.

"It's alright, El," said Will as he shut the door.

Will went downstairs and waited for Devin.

"Hey, where are Mike and El?" asked Devin as Will started heading the the car driven by Devon's older brother.

"El's really upset about her dad right now," said Will. "Maybe you'll meet Mike tomorrow."

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"Hey, Will," said Mike as he knocked on Will's bedroom door 45 minutes later. "Will?" Mike peaked inside to see it empty. The old familiar feeling of panic set in. He almost asked El to find him, but remembered that she no longer had her powers.

"Will!" Mike called as he ran down the stairs followed by El. She noticed a piece of paper on the kitchen counter.

"Mike, he left a note," said El. Mike headed over to her.

"The guys and I got a gig. I'll be back in a few hours, don't panic. Will."

"A gig," said Mike. "What does he mean?"

"Will joined a band with his new friends," said El.

"What? Why didn't he tell me?"

"He doesn't think he's very good, yet," said El. "He's still learning to play. I like it, but know still don't know a lot about music."

"Is that why he changed his hair?"

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Will got back around 8:30 as his friends all had to be home because they had family visiting. He also felt like he owed it to Mike, who was leaving Sunday to not stay away too long. Things had gone pretty well, considering it was a Thanksgiving evening gig at a bowling alley. Will grabbed a can of pop from the fridge and headed up to his room to get changed. Maybe Mike and El would want to see a movie.

Mike barged into Will's room as he was grabbing some clothes from his drawer.

"Mike, stop!" said El.

"What's going on?" asked Will.

"What's going on? What's going on?" asked an astounded Mike. "I'm only here a couple days and you just randomly take off without telling me!"

Will angrily threw his clothes on his bed. "I tried to invite you to come along, but you wouldn't let me talk, Mike. And I get you wanted to spend time alone with El, but I'd been waiting over two hours and my friend was picking me up."

"El was clearly upset, you couldn't have waited a little longer?"

"Mike, it's okay," said El.

"It's not okay," said Mike. "Will's just throwing a fit because he didn't get his way like he always does."

"I'm not the one throwing a fit, Mike," Will retorted. He was past the point of quietly putting up with Mike's temper tantrums without saying anything. Mike often took out his frustrations about things on Will and Will never said anything. He understood that Mike sometimes needed to vent, even if it often hurt Will's feelings-like when he was angry about Max trick-or-treating with them Halloween of '84. The moment he'd destroyed Castle Byers had changed his passive nature as far as his friendship with the party members went. "And in all the time you've known me, how many times have I thrown a fit? Better yet, the whole time I was in the party, how many times did I get my way? Can you think of one time, just one?"

Mike opened his mouth to retort, but couldn't think of any. Will was right. "Will, I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter," said Will.

"Yes it does," said Mike. "Look, I went looking for you, and you weren't there. I just panicked because it brought back old memories. I didn't mean to leave you out."

Will shrugged. "For the record, Mike, I don't mind you wanting to spend time alone with El. I get it, but don't expect me to just patiently wait around hoping that you'll want to hang out with me again. I'm not that pathetic kid I used to be anymore."

"What? Will, you were never pathetic!" said Mike.

"Yeah, Mike. I was, I really was."

"El, can you give us a minute?" asked Mike.

"You don't have to leave, El," said Will.

"Will, I need to talk to you," said Mike.

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of El," said Will.

"Will, c'mon!" said Mike.

"No, you c'mon, Mike!" said Will.

"Will, do you want me to stay?" asked El. Will was silent for a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah, I do," said Will. El took a seat at Will's desk. Will folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. Mike stood there awkwardly for a few seconds. "What is it, Mike?"

"It's just... With everything that happened to you, I'm sorry I wasn't there. I mean, you were kidnapped and possessed and the Castle Byers got destroyed by the storm..."

"The storm didn't destroy Castle Byers, Mike. I did," said Will.

"What? Why would you do that?" asked Mike.

"Had an epiphany," said Will.

"An epiphany?" asked Mike. "What does that mean?"

"I just realized how stupid it was for me to rely on all that stupid kid's stuff. It took two of my best friends ditching me several times and then laughing at me, but I got the message. Star Wars, X-Men, D I'm done with all that."

"I'm sorry about that, Will. We were being jerks."

"It doesn't matter, Mike. And I should thank you. I'm actually trying new things right now and I like those things. It's nice not needing my friends to take care of me all the time anymore."

"I'm sorry I haven't been there for you, but you used to talk to me about things," said Mike.

"You used to care," said Will.

"I still care, Will," said Mike. "It's just that Lucas and I had girlfriends and we were learning to balance our love lives with the party. But after everything we've been through together, how could you think I'd stopped caring about you?"

"What would you think if you were me, Mike?" asked Will. "Huh? What? Your friends who had always been there for you suddenly constantly ditching you and laughing at you? What would you think? Because I was starting to think my friends didn't want me around."

"Of course we wanted you around, Will. You were just upset that we had girlfriends and wanted to spend time with them."

"I was upset because the party was ruined," said Will. "But I decided that day I was done with the party."

"What?" asked Mike. "Like you didn't want to be friends with us anymore."

"Of course I still wanted to be friends," said Will. "I was just done with the party. Clinging to all that party stuff was making me miserable."

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"Dustin, are you drunk?" asked Will.

Dustin hiccuped into the phone and it echoed into Will's ear. His words had been slurred since Will had picked up the phone a few seconds earlier. "I think I accidentally picked up the wrong eggnog."

Will chuckled a little. "I guess you can't handle your liquor."

"Nope," said Dustin. "Dude, wait until you see the campaign Mike planned for you tomorrow!"

"Campaign?" asked Will.

"Shit!" said Dustin. "That was supposed to be a surprise."

"Oh, okay, cool," said Will.

"My parents are calling, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow," said Will. He hung up the phone. El and Jonathan were in their rooms packing for their trip. Will looked at his small bag. He didn't feel like he needed to take much. He felt a sense of dread. Six months earlier, nothing would have made him happier that a campaign with his friends, but things changed drastically when he destroyed Castle Byers.

"Will?" El lightly knocked on his door.

"What's up?" asked Will as he was shaken from his thoughts.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just nervous about seeing everyone again," said Will.

"I-I'm nervous too," said El.

"Yeah, it'll be weird going back, but it'll be good to see everyone again."

"I'll tell Mike 'no' if he asks you to leave because he wants to be alone with me," said El.

"El, I'm not upset about that, don't worry. It's natural for him to want to be alone with you. I just get irritated when he expects me to just patiently wait my turn and do nothing else while he's talking to you."

"Oh," said El. "That's all?"

"Yeah, I promise. It was never your fault when Mike and I fought," said Will emphatically.

"Okay," said El as she yawned.

"You'd better get some sleep. Goodnight, El," said Will as he hugged her.

"Good night, Will," said El as she hugged him back.

Will sat on his bed and stared at his overnight bag. He made a snap decision and walked downstairs to the kitchen. His aunt had cooked some clams at dinner and given some to Joyce to take home. Will was allergic to shellfish. Just a tiny piece would do the trick without making him *too* sick. He opened the container, popped a tiny piece in his mouth and swallowed it.

Will then went up to the bathroom. He grabbed some lotion with aloe (he was also allergic to it) and rubbed it under his left armpit. That should do the trick. Will went back to his room and crawled into bed. He figured the stuff would kick in by the time he woke up.

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"Mom, Will's sick!" Jonathan called down the hall the morning of December 26th. Joyce hurried down the hall followed by El. They saw Will curled into a fetal position with his face buried in his hands, not knowing that he was regretting his actions from the night before.

Joyce knelt beside Will's bed and felt his forehead. He was burning up. "Will, Baby, what's wrong?"

In response, Will sat up and ran to the bathroom. He was doubled over the toilet vomiting when his three family members caught up to him. Joyce rubbed his back between his shoulder blades. As his shirt rolled up a little, she noticed a rash on his side. She lifted the shirt a little and gasped.

"Maybe we should postpone our trip," said Jonathan.

"No," said Will hoarsely as he reached over and flushed the toilet. "Mike's really looking forward to seeing El and Nancy's looking forward to seeing you. Don't postpone things because of me."

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Will slept for several hours after El and Jonathan left for Hawkins. When he woke up, he felt intense pain under his armpit than was worse than the rash. An abscess had grown. Will went to the bathroom and lifted his arm (an act that was excruciating) and looked in the mirror. His mother walked up behind him and gasped.

"I'm taking you to the hospital," said Joyce.

"No, Mom, I'll be fine," said Will.

"I don't want to lose you and I'm not taking any chances," said Joyce.

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Dustin didn't remember calling Will and accidentally telling him about Mike's surprise campaign the night before.

"Where's Will?" asked Mike.

"He woke up really sick this morning," said Jonathan. He's getting some rest. Mike looked sadly at the campaign board. He had wanted to make up with Will for a lot of things.

"You should probably call your mom and let her know you got here safely," said Nancy. "You can see how Will's doing."

"Alright," said Jonathan. "Is your mom okay with me making a long distance call?"

"It's fine," said Nancy.

Jonathan picked up the phone. "Mom, it's Jonathan. Just letting you know that El and I got here safely. We want to see how Will's doing. Call us." Jonathan hung up the phone. He looked worried.

"That's weird that she didn't answer, she wanted us to call when we got here," he said.

"Maybe she was taking care of Will or went out or something," said Mike.

"I'm going to check with Aunt Pam and Uncle Andy just to be safe,"

said Jonathan. He picked up the phone again to dial his aunt and uncle. "Hey Aunt Pam, I just called to check on Mom and Will and no one answered. Have you heard from them? What? Okay, thanks."

"What happened?" asked El as Jonathan hung up the phone and he looked pale.

"Mom had to take Will to the hospital, apparently he developed a huge abscess under his arm and he's having other serious reactions."

"What?" said Mike. "We should go to Columbus to see him."

"Not tonight," said Karen as she came down the stairs. "Jonathan and El just drove from Columbus. They should get some rest overnight to before trying to head back."

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"Mrs. Byers, there's a few things we need to talk to you about regarding your son's test results," said Dr. Trenton.

Joyce glanced at a sleeping Will before following the doctor to the next room. "What is it?" asked Joyce.

"Do you know the exact nature of the chemicals your son was exposed to a couple years ago. It might explain the severe reaction."

"I know someone who does," said Joyce. "Dr. Sam Owens was overseeing the lab after Brenner disappeared. He can help."

"Good," said Dr. Trenton. "There's something else. It looks like your son did this to himself based on the pattern of the rash and his other symptoms. This appears to be an allergic reaction."

"He did it to himself?" asked Joyce.

"We believe so," said Dr. Trenton. "We also have reason to believe he suffers from depression. He's been through a lot the last couple years, and based on what you told us earlier, he's had a lot of difficulty in his life, so it's understandable. We should get it treated, especially if he's causing himself harm and has a tendency to keep things bottled up like you said he does."

"What can we do?" asked Joyce.

"We need you to talk to him first and find out what he did to himself first. Then we'll figure it out."

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The next morning as Will woke up, Joyce was at his side. "Hey sweetheart," said Joyce as she took Will's hand. "Are you feeling better?"

"I think so," said Will hoarsely. Joyce squeezed his hand and took a deep breath.

"There's something I need to ask you, Baby, and I need you to be completely honest with me."

"Okay," said Will nervously.

"Did you make yourself sick on purpose, Will?"

Will looked away and closed his eyes. Tears started to leak from the corners.

"Will," said Joyce as she started rubbing his shoulder. "Talk to me, please. Whatever is going on, we'll figure it out, but I need you to talk to me."

Will nodded. "I ate a small piece of clam that Aunt Pam left and rubbed some aloe lotion under my arm. The thought of going to Hawkins suddenly really scared me."

Joyce sat next to Will on his bed, pulled him into a hug, and began to gently rock him. "Why were you scared to go back?" asked Joyce, even though she had a couple of ideas. "Didn't you want to see your friends?"

"I don't know," said Will. "I just feel like I'm intruding on Mike and El all the time. Then Dustin called and said that Mike was planning a surprise D&D campaign for me. I don't want to play it.. ever again. I thought Mike understood when I told him I was done with the party at Thanksgiving, but I guess he didn't get the message."

"Why don't you want to play D&D anymore, Baby?"

"Because it's stupid," said Will. "I kept trying to get the others to play it last summer and they never wanted to. I finally got Mike and Lucas to do a campaign before I realized the Mind Flayer was back, but they made it very clear that they weren't in the mood. I finally got mad and left. I realized it was stupid for me to cling to it like I did when I was little. It was just a stupid distraction from...everything."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to bother you. You and El have been going through something way worse than me not wanting to play D&D anymore after what happened to Hopper."

Joyce gently, but firmly took Will's face in her hands. "Hey, it doesn't matter what I'm going through, I will always have time for you, always. Yes, we just lost Hopper, but we don't want to lose you as well. Understand?"

Will hesitated, then nodded. Joyce pulled him back into a hug.

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"Jonathan, your mother's on the phone," Karen called down to the basement where the party members, Jonathan and Nancy sat. Jonathan decided to go up to the kitchen and answer the phone. Mike decided to pick up the phone in the basement to listen.

"Mom, is Will alright?" Mike heard Jonathan ask.

"He'll be fine," said Joyce. "But we found out that he made himself sick of purpose because he was scared to go back to Hawkins. The doctors also think he's suffering from depression and I think they're right. He was going through so much after everything, but didn't feel like he could talk to anyone because he thought we all had bigger problems than what he was going through."

"I'm going to drive back to Columbus," said Jonathan. "I'll see if El wants to stay here a little longer, but she'll probably want to help Will. I'll see you in a few hours."

Mike hung up the phone after he heard Jonathan hang up. Dustin, Lucas, Max and El all looked at him questioningly.

"He did it to himself," said Mike.

"What?" asked Lucas.

"He was scared to come back here," said Mike.

"He said he was nervous the night before we came," said El. "I thought he was nervous like me, but it must have been a different kind of nervous."

"We should go to Columbus with you," said Mike. "We can visit Will and let him know we're there for him. The doctors think he's suffering from depression. His mom said he didn't feel like he could talk to anyone."

"He's been holding it in all this time," said Lucas. "I tried to talk to him about his campaign that day at the pool. He said he didn't care about that anymore and we had bigger things to worry about."

"He said he didn't matter," said El.

"What?" asked Dustin. "When did he say that?"

"Last summer when we were cleaning up Castle Byers. I could tell he was sad about something and he said 'It doesn't matter, I don't matter.' He said the 'I don't matter' part really quietly and told me I must have heard wrong when I asked him why he said that. I know I heard right."

"It must have been hard for him when the storm destroyed Castle Byers," said Lucas.

"It wasn't the storm, it was Will. He told me at Thanksgiving," said Mike.

"It's my fault," said El. "Everyone was trying to be there for me and Will needed help too."

"It's not your fault, El," said Mike. "It was me. I should have known

Will needed help. He wasn't just suddenly going to feel better just because the Mind Flayer was out of him. Him wanting to play D&D all the time was his way of asking for help."

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"Will, honey, you have visitors," said Joyce as she entered Will's hospital room followed by his cousin Emma, Devin, Cliff, Ian, and to the biggest pleasure for Will-Eric.

He beamed at his friends as they entered. Joyce noticed that her son looked truly happy to see his new friends and was glad to see that he wasn't alone in their new city.

"Think you'll feel well enough to play the New Year's Eve show?" asked Devin.

"I feel better than I felt yesterday, so yeah," said Will.

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Mike, Nancy, Jonathan, El, Max, Lucas, and Dustin headed down the hall toward Will's room. They conveniently "forgot" to check in at the front desk as they likely would have been told that there was a limit on the number of visitors.

When they got close to Will's room, they heard laughter. "Are we sure that's the right room?" asked Lucas.

"It's the right room," said El. "I hear Devin and Eric."

"Devin and Eric?" said Dustin. "Will's new friends?"

El nodded. "I can hear Cliff and Ian and Will's cousin Emma too."

Jonathan quickened his pace and walked ahead of the group and into Will's room. He saw Will playing Scruples with his friends. He looked a lot more healthy than he had the day before.

Jonathan walked right up to Will and hugged him.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in Hawkins," said

Will.

"What are we doing here?" asked Jonathan incredulously. "We found out you were in the hospital."

"Well I'm not dying or anything," said Will, "You didn't have to cut your visit short."

"It's not cut short," said Mike. "We're just finishing it up here." He turned to the band members. "Can you give us a minute. We need to talk to Will about something."

Eric noticed that Will looked slightly annoyed about Mike asking his new friends to leave. He remembered there was tension at Thanksgiving. He gave Will's shoulder a squeeze before leaving the room.

The band members waited out in the hall while Will's Hawkins' friends spoke to him. After a few minutes they heard Will angrily shouting "LOOK, MIKE, I DON'T WANT TO PLAY D&D EVER AGAIN. I HATE IT NOW. I *HATE* IT!"

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Will started taking antidepressants in the following weeks. Eric didn't think that Will seemed depressed most of the time-only when Hawkins came up. He went to the library to do some research on Hawkins. He found out that Will had disappeared for a week in 1983. Hawkins Lab had done some foul play and people ended up dead. Will had also been there that night Starcourt mall had been destroyed.

Mike visited sometimes, or Will and El would go to Hawkins to visit him. Will and Mike always seemed to end up arguing and Eric noticed that Will was visibly shaken. He began offering Will a shoulder to cry on, wanting to be there for him.

He decided to ask Will for help getting into the honors classes.

"Why the sudden interest?" asked Will.

"Oh, you know, I just want to get into a good college so I don't have

to be stuck here the rest of my life."

"Sure, I'll help," said Will.

It was the perfect excuse to spend time alone with Will without arousing the suspicion on his parents. He bought some playboy magazines just to be safe. His sister Debbie ended up finding them.

"What are you doing with these?" she asked. "Mom and Dad'll kill you if they find out you have them."

"They'll do a lot worse if they find out what I really am," said Eric.

"What do you mean?" asked Debbie. He hesitated. His sister would understand.

"I'm g-gay, Debbie."

"Oh," said Debbie. "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"Because I'm in love with Will and I constantly have to fight the urge to kiss him and well-"

Debbie was silent. "I guess I've always wondered. Don't worry, you're secret is safe with me. Does Will know?"

"No," said Eric.

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Eric was able to enroll in the honors classes sophomore year, much to the delight of his parents. They saw Will Byers as a positive influence on their son and allowed him more freedom to spend time with the band. If only they knew the real reason why Eric spent so much time with Will.

Something very strange happened to Will and El when they visited Hawkins on Thanksgiving break of 1986. Neither was interested in going into details, but El was no longer dating Mike. They also found out that Hopper was alive. Mike seemed to be trying to make things up to Will, but they still ended up fighting all the time.

Hopper was enrolled in the mental hospital. Eric could tell that Will saw him as a father figure just as much as El did.

"You really care about Hopper, don't you?" asked Eric.

"Yeah, he's been there for me more than my birth father ever was. I can't believe I wasted so much time trying get Lonnie's approval."

"I'm still wasting time trying to get my Dad's approval," said Eric. Will looked at him carefully.

"Lonnie used to constantly call me queer and fag, you know?" Eric didn't know it, but Will was telling him that to see how he'd react.

"Sounds like he's a real asshole," said Eric.

"He is. He didn't just call me that in the house, he told his friends that too. Lots of kids at school bullied me and other things happened because of the rumors."

"I'm sorry," said Eric.

"I was always glad for my mom, though. I always knew if it was true, she'd still love me."

That conversation was at the front of Eric's mind for weeks. His inability to express his true feelings for Will had been eating away at him for over a year. The conversation made him think that Will could actually be gay as well. Even if he wasn't, he wouldn't hate Eric for it.

Eric valued Will's friendship, even though he wanted so much more. He didn't want to lose the friendship. One chilly day in February, Eric made up his mind to tell Will how he felt. They went to Will's house to study. No one else was home.

Eric began pacing back and forth across the room as he worked up the courage.

"What's wrong?" asked Will.

"There's something I need to tell you," said Eric. "It might make you hate me."

"You don't torture puppies, do you?" asked Will.

"No."

"Then I won't hate you, I promise."

"I hope you're right because your friendship means the world to me, you know."

Will smiled. "Your friendship means the world to me too."

"Even though I'm gay?" asked Eric as he decided it was best to just say it.

"You're gay?" asked Will.

"Yes. I thought I could be for a long time, but my parents are super religious so I tried to ignore it. Then, well, you moved here and I just started developing feelings for you.. and I'm sure."

Will was quiet for a moment. He fidgeted nervously. "This isn't a joke, is it?"

"What?" asked Eric. He remembered Will telling him that he'd been the butt of a lot of jokes in Hawkins. "No, it's not a joke. I'm really in love with you."

Will nodded. "Okay, good because I'm in love with you t-too."

"Holy shit," said Eric with a nervous laugh. "Is this really happening?"

"I hope so," said Will.

"Can I kiss you?" asked Eric. Will nodded. Eric quickly closed and latched Will's bedroom door. He walked over, took Will's face in his hands and softly and tenderly kissed him on the lips. It was an amazing sensation. "I've wanted to do that for a long time."

"Want to do anything else now?" asked Will. "I mean, I'm not ready for-you know- yet, but-"

"We can try a few things," said Eric. He gently pushed Will down onto

his and climbed on top of him as he kissed his forehead and neck. Will sighed with pleasure as Eric's hands ran all over his torso while his lips were all over his face. It was over a year of pent up feelings.

"Wait," said Will suddenly.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" asked Eric.

"No, not at all," said Will. Tears started forming in his eyes. "It's just, there are things about me... Things that have happened to me. I'm messed up and I still have nightmares sometimes."

"I-I know you went missing in '83. I read about it in the library. I should have told you I knew and I'm sorry."

"There's more," said Will. "I'm not ready to talk about it yet, but there's more. If you.. If we... you have a right to know that I have issues... a lot of them."

"I kind of figured that," said Eric as he traced Will's face with his index finger.

"Mmmm, I like that," said Will.

"What this?" asked Eric as he continued to run his finger over Will's face. Will smiled and nodded. "What else do you like?"

"I have no idea. Haven't exactly had the chance to experience anything."

"Me neither," said Eric. "We'll just have to figure out what we like together."

"Okay," said Will. Eric leaned down and kissed him again.

"I don't think I've ever been this happy in my entire life. We have to be careful, but I'm going to shower you with affection every chance I get."

"Sounds good," said Will.

Eric curled up next to Will and pulled the blankets over them. It was

a really cold day after all. He wrapped his arms around Will pulled him close and began caressing his hair.

Will had allowed himself to be vulnerable with Mike when they were younger and he'd gotten hurt. That was a completely platonic friendship-at least on Will's part. Entering into a romantic relationship with Eric scared him, but he realized that Eric would never hurt him.

Will and Eric spent the next several sneaking around a lot. They didn't know how the people closest to them would react if they found out. But a few people did find out. El was the first.

She came home early from Lacrosse practice and Will had forgotten to close his bedroom door all the way. El went to ask if she could borrow his chemistry notes to Eric leaning over Will as he sat on his desk and had his legs around Eric's waist and arms around Eric's neck.

"Sorry!" said El.

"El!" Will exclaimed. "We were just-shit!"

"Is he your boyfriend now?" asked El.

"Um...well yes," said Will.

"Don't be embarrassed, Will. I don't think it's gross. I'm not a mouth breather."

"Thanks," said Will. "That actually means a lot."

"Mom and Jonathan won't care either. Neither will Hopper."

Will knew that El was right. He and Eric decided to tell his mother and brother the next time Jonathan visited from college. Will knew his mother and brother wouldn't suddenly hate him, but he was still incredibly nervous. Joyce and Jonathan picked up on that and were nervous.

"What is it, Baby? Is something wrong?" asked Joyce.

"Well-"Will began. He glanced at Eric. El gave him an encouraging nod. "It's just... I'm gay and Eric's my boyfriend," Will blurted.

Joyce and Jonathan glanced at each other. They looked relieved. "Oh thank God!" said Joyce. "I thought you were going to tell me you were having episodes again."

"So you're okay with this?" asked Will.

"Of course we are, Bud," said Jonathan.

When it came time to visit Hopper, El did the talking. Hopper was happy for Will, but told him to be careful as there were a lot of crazy people out there who thought they were morally right.

They were later discovered by their band mates. Will and Eric were the first to arrive at practice that day. Eric had lugged some new speakers to Devin's place. He was a little sore. Will got there shortly after Eric had finished setting the system up and began to massage his shoulders.

"Did you lug those up here all by yourself?" asked Will. Eric shrugged.

"I didn't feel like waiting for the others."

"I would have helped."

"You're already helping. Where did you learn to massage so well?"

"I took mental notes from all the massages you've given me," said Will.

"You've always been a quick study," said Eric as he gently grabbed Will's wrist and kissed it. He turned around and pulled Will into his lap.

"The guys'll be here any minute," said Will.

"All the more reason to hurry up and get some affection in," said Eric before pressing his lips softly to Will's. The kiss lasted just long enough that Devin, Ian, and Cliff walked in to witness the end of it.

"Shit!" Eric exclaimed as he looked up to see his three friends watching him in an embrace with Will who quickly hopped off his lap.

"Whoa, guys," said Devin. "It's alright."

"It is?" asked Will.

"Yeah. Don't worry. Will and Eric have nothing to worry about from us, right guys?" Devin shot Ian and Cliff a warning look.

"Of course they don't," said Cliff.

"Yeah, we're not NAZIS," said Ian.

"Thanks," said Eric. Devin walked up to them.

"Just promise you'll be more careful. There are a lot of psychos out there and I don't want anything to happen to either of you."

"We'll be more careful," said Will.

"Good," said Devin. "Oh, and Eric, since I was the one who asked Will to sit with us, you owe me big time."

"I agree," said Eric as he stood up and wrapped his arms around Will.

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Early in their junior year, Will and Eric were laying on their stomachs on Will's bed studying for a physics test. Eric continually leaned over to kiss Will or nuzzle his neck as he recited their study materials.

"Are you going to focus?" asked Will.

"I am focusing," said Eric. "These sensations will help me remember this stuff."

"So it's a study technique?" asked Will.

"Yes, and it's very effective. Now read the next question." Eric ran his hand along Will's back, then reached under his shirt to feel the bare

